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SUBJECT: LAO DEFENSE MINISTER SPEAKS OUT AGAINST CHILD TRAFFICKING  
AT ANTI-CHILD TRAFFICKING DAY EVENT

¶1. Summary: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense Lieutenant General Douangchay Phichit spoke to a crowd of 1000 government officials and members of the public at an all-day event marking the International Day Against Child Trafficking on December ¶7. The Minister described Lao government actions to try to combat the problem and warned of the dangers faced by children who become victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation. This is one of the strongest public statements by a senior Lao official this year specifically on child trafficking and sexual exploitation. The event was organized by the Lao Youth Union and funded by local UN agencies, the US Embassy Public Diplomacy Section, and NGOs. End summary.

¶2. Laos's first-ever official ceremony to mark the International Day Against Child Trafficking, which commemorates the adoption of the UN Protocol to Prevent and Punish Trafficking in Persons, took place on December 7. (The International Day Against Child Trafficking is actually December 12.) The Lao Youth Union, a "mass organization" under the communist party, organized the event. Speaking on behalf of the Lao government was Lieutenant General Phichit, who in addition to his role as Deputy PM and Minister of National Defense is also the President of the National Committee on Combating Human Trafficking. General Phichit warned that human trafficking was a serious problem and that combating the problem required the cooperation of the both the public and private sectors. Laying out government actions against trafficking over the last few years, he noted that the GOL had made efforts to prevent and suppress the problem by passing legislation criminalizing all forms of human trafficking and had set up programs to help the victims. He then focused on the specific problem of child trafficking, saying that 1.2 million children in the world were "for sale" annually and forced to work in a variety of places, including factories, entertainment clubs, restaurants, bars, and other "bad places." Some, he said, were forced to provide sexual services and raped.

¶3. Following the Minister, a representative from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in Laos described the global scope of the problem, saying that human trafficking was now the third largest source of profits for organized crime, after drugs and arms trafficking. Lao Youth Union President Khamphan Sithidampha said that child trafficking in Laos was a "matter of future national development and security" and called on all sectors of society to protect Lao children. After the speeches, children's groups performed plays, puppet shows, and songs and gave presentations to warn the public - especially other children - about the dangers of child trafficking.

¶4. In attendance at the event were representatives from all government ministries, various NGOs and international organizations, and students and families from Vientiane. Funding for the event was provided by the UN organizations in Laos, a small grant by the US Embassy's Public Diplomacy Section, and several NGOs. The event received extensive press coverage.

¶5. Comment: We were pleased to see such a strong and high-profile anti-trafficking statement by General Phichit, who is one of the Lao government's most senior officials. Also commendable was the strong

emphasis placed on educating children on the dangers of trafficking.

Although child trafficking within Laos has not reached the level of other countries in the region, trafficking of young teenagers to neighboring countries, particularly Thailand, is a problem. Public education is the key to halting this type of exploitation and preventing future growth in domestic child trafficking.

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